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ABSTRACT

It is time to reevaluate the myths of the nineteenth century and the structures they created pertaining to education. There is a need to utilize new power relationships to creatively build a pluralistic educational system. It must be recognized that conflict can lead to collaboration if respect is present, whereas collaboration which ignores conflict will not in the long run be productive. The simplistic truth orientation of the social reformers of the nineteenth century, who felt that they could build our democracy and school systems on a foundation of acculturation and moral education, did not recognize the legitimate rights and humanity of the people they wanted to help. Today we reap the legacy of these policies; but hopefully we are more willing to recognize the necessity of citizen involvement with its accompanying conflict so that differences will not be suppressed and legitimate procedures will be established to educate citizens, help them create alternatives viable for their children, and help us to bring about needed changes and reconciliation of conflicts. In order to do so, simplistic dichotomizing between those who have the "truth" and those who do not will have to be replaced by acceptance of different approaches and temporary, issue-oriented coalitions of citizens and professionals. (Author/KSM)

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MAKING CONFLICT COLLABORATIVE

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The New York Times report on April 9th of the National School Board Association convention had the following headline: "The Local School Board: Erosion of Control is a Vital Issue at National Parley." A flyer being passed around during the convention called local control of education "one of democracy's taproots." What were the "insidious" forces that were wearing away at the foundations of this key democratic institution?--the courts: by upholding students' rights, challenging unequal financing, standardized testing, tracking, and desegregation; the federal government: by passing legislation that provides funds for special needs and therefore "control"; the teachers: by collective bargaining, lobbying for legislation, backing candidates, and even running for school board positions; the parents and other citizens: by demanding more voice in decisions, not just at election time or bond-issue time, but in the ongoing operation of the schools.

Such concerns about one of "democracy's taproots" should give us the opportunity to reflect about this institution and its functioning by, and in the interest of, "the people." The question is--which people?

Recent historical accounts of the growth of public education in our cities[1] indicate that there are many myths implicit in such glorification of the democratic mission and functioning of our schools. Before the great growth of the school system, parents and teachers

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in eighteenth century New York City were partners in the socialization of youth through the selective purchasing of "teacher skills." Diversity was acceptable, and the Dutch, English and French supported schools where their mother tongue was the medium of instruction. The nineteenth century picture of schooling was radically different. With the increase of immigrants, there were many more children, many more poor parents, and greater diversity in language and religion. Teachers began to organize the Free School Society to support the growth of public education and the "Lancaster Plan," permitting them to educate a large number of children by having older ones drill younger ones and thus get the job done cheaply, to recruit older students into the "profession," and to keep the streets free of "vagrants," henceforth forced to remain in public schools or reform schools.

Although early educational reformers pleaded their case with fine and uplifting words, the major goal was control of the foreigners and coercive de-ethnization through the only institution which could do this legitimately. I doubt if most of the families struggling to survive without the help of their children's income, and most of the children spending their days in monotonous drills, would have agreed with De Witt Clinton, nominal head of the Free School Society, that this form of schooling was "a blessing sent down from heaven to redeem the poor and distressed."

Schools were to be places "where the indigent may be excited to emulate the cleanliness, decorum and mental improvement of those in better circumstances."[2] Schools were places in which moral reform

could be institutionalized. The problems of the time were economic and social: too rapid expansion of cities due to increasing mass production, unemployment, overcrowding, and crime. In response to these problems, and particularly in response to what were perceived as the moral failings of an uneducated poor class, many of whom were churchless or guided by a church alien to the city's Protestant leaders, school systems were established in New York and Boston. Early reformers felt that the conditions of the poor were due to "moral causes," and would therefore only be cured by 'moral remedies." In the words of the Boston School Committee, 1850:

> In our schools they must receive moral and religious teaching, powerful enough if possible to keep them in the right path amid the moral darkness which is their daily and domestic walk.[3]

There were some who did not agree with the assimilationist and moral arguments for centralization. But the poor immigrants had little power and only a few allies. Proposals were made to set up decentralized districts, and to allow parents to send their children to schools taught by teachers who shared the same language and religion. The Irish protested what they felt were distorted textbooks which did not give sufficient recognition to the contributions of Catholics, and had negative stereotypes of the Irish people. Germans fought and won approval to maintain German language schools, only to have them shut down soon afterwards. The Common Council in New York rejected pluralism and instead set up a central board of education in 1841 and funneled resources to this board. While democratically

elected, it was not representative of its major client population, the immigrants. The nature of the assimilationist ideology made this justifiable.

Conflict existed; collaboration was impossible. How could there be collaboration with people who were considered "immoral foreigners?" It was believed that if the demands of the foreigners were met and they retained their national customs and their ethnicity, they would "not /be/ good members of society as they would otherwise be."[4] The teachers believed that they had a mission to purify society. Foreigners were considered to be bringing "poison" to our shores and the schools were to be a "filter" to cleanse them and thereby homogenize our society and make it safe for democracy.[5] Many joined John Quincy Adams when he said "become American or go home!"[6]

The interests of the majority and of the teachers who wanted to become professionals were served by centralizing control in elected or appointed school boards. There was a need for rapid growth, for building schools, standardizing curricula and developing teacher training. There was a need to legitimize public education on a large scale. Teachers became partners with legislatures, for money was needed to increase their numbers, and raise the quality of teaching.

Some of the reformers spoke idealistically of integration of rich and poor, but they saw this in terms of giving the poor "good models" and making the rich more "sympathetic." They hoped that good feelings would prevent class conflict. It soon became clear that the wealthier inhabitants moved away from the "immoral foreigners," and

segregated residential patterns meant segregated school systems. It also became clear that schooling was to produce behavioral conformity, but not acceptance in the social and organizational networks of the majority.[7] Schooling did provide a means of mobility for some, including those who became teachers, but most of those who did succeed probably "made it" through other channels.[8]

As we examine current conflict over resources for bilingual education, ethnic studies, community control of schools, desegregation, demands for increasing the number of minority teachers, and so on, we can see that many of these issues were present in the mid-nineteenth century when our school systems were created. However, the ideology of assimilation and moral education and the powerlessness and problems of the new immigrants prevented these issues from gaining support. It may be that changes in politics and pressures to change ideology have begun to make pluralistic school systems possible.

We are beginning to realize that size and standardization are not always efficient for education, and some very large schools are experimenting with sub-dividing into smaller units. We are beginning to realize that support for education in the mother tongue of minority groups will not undermine democracy and that schools may not, by themselves, be able to solve all the social problems of society. And we are beginning to realize that the structures that were set up in the mid-nineteenth century may need to be adapted to new political realities which make conflict likely and collaboration necessary. In short, we are beginning to accept pluralism.

School boards today may continue to function as agencies of legitimation for central bureaucracies.[9] If they do, they may not be able to effectively mediate between citizens who are demanding influence and pluralism, and the administration. Often, the constituencies of the school board members are not clear, there is upper-middle class and homogeneous membership, new members are pressured by incumbents to become "properly" socialized, and decision-making is made in private. This kind of board may work well when the accepted ideology is a combination of assimilation and moral education by the rich for the poor. It may work well if teachers see decisions being made in their interests, students are passive or truant, and parents are not shouting their concerns.

However, teachers often no longer see their interests being served by the legislatures and the boards. Pressure from minorities has led to demands to destroy the very protective structures that the teacher associations created in the nineteenth century. For example, the New York City Board of Examiners was created in 1898 to ensure standards, and now minority groups are demanding that it be destroyed because it is preventing recruitment of minority teachers.[10] Legislatures, once the friends of teachers because of their support for rapid expansion of public education and teacher training institutions, are now demanding that clear procedures for evaluation of teacher competence be developed not by teacher associations but by state and local boards.[11] At the same time, teachers are only "quasi-professionals,"[12] with little autonomy and status insecurity. Boards have had

to mediate between teachers and citizens and to develop new ways to resolve conflict.

Under the assimilationist model of the nineteenth century, one would not expect parents to be partners in the socialization of youth. Clearly, they were a threat to the legitimate authority of the teachers to transform their children into obedient workers, moral citizens and non-ethnic Americans.[13] How could they be considered partners when they were seen as part of the problem which schooling was expected to overcome? Things have changed lately. Collective action on the part of parents is currently seen as more legitimate and parents fight professionals as well as join with them in pressing for legislation and reforms. Boards have a greater responsibility to inform parents and to be informed of their views.

Obedience, drill, cleanliness, de-ethnization, and moral education do not seem likely to please twentieth century students as educational goals, and they express their displeasure by joining "the revolt of the client."[14] Professionals have less automatic respect, society is not seen as the land of opportunity, and ethnic pride is explicitly valued. It is not surprising that students find persuasion ineffective and resort to disruption to be heard.[15] Boards have had to deal with conflict between students of different races, and between administrators and students. A study of 15 high schools in New York State [16] indicates that few white students and teachers see racism in their school, but that most minority students feel that they are left out and treated unfairly. Boards must be able to turn

this underlying conflict into collaborative strategies for change[17] since assimilation will no longer do as a rationale for racism.

Some boards are beginning to reflect the diversity of their communities and are learning how to contain conflict without ignoring underlying differences in interests and values. For example, a decentralized school board in a large city has been able to serve as a forum for conflict between black and white groups in the community, and seems not to have been immobilized by this conflict.

After heated arguments relating to racial issues, black and white board members expressed their feelings to the press that the fearful images they had had of each other were undergoing some changes. While certainly not hiding disagreements, and definitely realizing that vested interests were going to lead to future conflicts, one board member said "we've developed respect for each other."[18] It is this kind of respect, respect based on collaboration that emerges out of conflict, that gives hope for a more pluralistic system.

Social reformers with a "truth" orientation have a passionate conviction that the changes called for are somehow the fundamental and moral order of things.[19] This was the orientation of the early education reformers in the nineteenth century who felt that they could build our democracy and our school systems on a foundation of acculturation and moral education. They did not recognize the legitimate rights and humanity of the people they wanted to help. Today we reap the legacy of these policies. Hopefully we are more willing

to recognize the necessity of citizen involvement with its accompanying conflict so that differences will not be suppressed and legitimate procedures will be established to educate citizens, help them create alternatives viable for their children, and help us to bring about needed changes and reconciliation of conflicts. In order to do this, simplistic dichotomizing between those who have "the truth" and those who do not will have to be replaced by acceptance of different approaches and temporary, issue-oriented coalitions of citizens and professionals.

It is time to re-evaluate the myths of the ninetheenth century and the structures they created. We need to utilize new power relationships to creatively build a pluralistic system. We need to recognize that conflict can lead to collaboration if respect is present and that collaboration which ignores conflict will not, in the long run, be productive.

FOOTNOTES

[1]For some provocative new views of mid-nineteenth century educational history, see Michael B. Katz's The Irony of Early School Reform, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968; Stanley K. Schultz's The Culture Factory: Boston Public Schools, 1789-1860, New York: Oxford University Press, 1973; Carl F. Kaestle's The Evolution of an Urban School System; New York City, 1750-1850, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973; and Colin Greer's The Great School Legend, New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1972.

[2]Kaestle, op. cit. p. 85, reports the Free School Society report of 1825.

[3]Schultz, op. cit., p. 291.

[4]Kaestle, op. cit., p. 143, from the Public School Society Executive Committee report of 1843.

[5]Schultz, op. cit., p. 230.

[6]Kaestle, op. cit., p. 85.

[7]See Milton M. Gordon's Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins, New York: Oxford University Press, 1964.

[8]See Greer, op. cit. for a discussion of different immigrant groups and schooling.

[9]Norman D Kerr, "The School Board as an Agency of Legitimation," in Sam Sieber and David Wilder's The School in Society, New York: The Free Press, 1973, pp. 380-400.

[10]See report on New York City Public Schools by G. Ramsey Liem, for ASPIRA Inc., Jan. 9, 1971.

[11]The Connecticut legislature passed Public Act 73-456 in 1973 which mandates annual review of all teachers on performance criteria proposed by state and local boards. Discussed in The Common, newspaper of New England Program in Teacher Education, Inc., Vol 2, No. 8, April 1974.

[12]S.D. Sieber, "Organizational Influences on Innovative Roles," In T.L. Eidell and J.M. Kitchel (eds.), Knowledge production and utilization in educational administration, Eugene, Oregon: Center for the Advanced Study of Educational Administration, pp. 120-142.

[13]Howard Becker, The Teacher in the Authority System of the Public Schools," Journal of Educational Psychology, 27, 1953, pp. 128-141.

[14]M. Haug and M. Sussman, "Professional Autonomy and the Revolt of the Client," Social Problems, 1969, 17, 153-161.

[15]W. Gamson, Power and Discontent. Homewood, Illinois: Dorsey Press, 1968.

[16]Alan Guskin, Judith Guskin (with the assistance of P. Cunningham), Organizational Crises in High Schools, 1974. This monograph (unpublished) is a revision of a report commissioned by the New York State Commission on the Quality, Cost and Financing of Elementary and Secondary Education, 1971.

[17]See some of the publications from the Center for New Schools in Chicago and the Center for the Advanced Study of Educational Administration in Eugene Oregon for some indications of new collaborative attempts within schools and within school districts.

[18]New York Times, April 9, 1974.

[19]Roland L. Warren, Truth, Love and Social Change, and other essays on community change, Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1973.